

The last word Radical culture work in the Reagan era

by the editors

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As the full scope of Reagan politics becomes evident, we see the concrete result of the so-called "drift to the right" of the 70s. The concerted economic attack on the working class which began with Nixon's New Economic Policy over a decade ago has been joined by the present cutbacks in welfare and social services, an offensive against the gains made by women, racial minorities, gays and lesbians, an increase in racist violence, wholesale dumping of health, safety, and environmental protections, intransigent militarism, increasing war preparations, and the prospect of extensive military intervention to prop up U.S. imperialism abroad.

As dangerous as these developments seem to everyone concerned with peace and human justice, we are not depressed or discouraged by the current situation because we also see a new resurgence of opposition activity, of fighting back. While the current situation invites comparison with the growth of the New Left and the anti-war movement in the 60s, we see important differences too. Today we have a large pool of experienced political activists who didn't join the "me" generation and the "culture of Narcissism," but who spent the 70s engaged in the long, slow, and unglamorous process of building local projects, doing long term organizing work, building specific issue and constituency movements. With a political understanding gained from practical experience as well as theoretical discussion, this group forms a key resource in building a new opposition to capitalism, racism, and patriarchy.

Today we also have a substantial group of cultural workers who are experienced in radical media work, who have built networks and alternative institutions ranging from film and video making groups to

distribution and exhibition organizations, and who have been active in and worked closely with political projects. At present activists working in Central American anti-imperialist struggles have a broad range of film, video, and slide materials for organizing and education, compared with the meager resources available in the early years of the Vietnam war. And we see a new sophistication and inventiveness in dealing with the mass media in events such as the Diablo Canyon anti-nuclear power protests this year, where demonstrators were able to stay in the news and present their case and actions repeatedly. These provide encouraging signs of commitment and maturity in political media activity.

We live in a literate, electronic communication, mass culture society. To be effective, the left must understand and use the media where possible and to work in, around, and in spite of the mass media's institutions when necessary. While radical cultural work is not autonomous from other kinds of political activity, it has its own nature and possibilities, which must be understood in order to develop an adequate strategy for change and effective tactics for struggle. This means analysis and practical work must proceed with both an accurate and sophisticated critique of the dominant cultural institutions under direct capitalist control such as Hollywood and the TV networks and also with a realistic understanding of how, where, and why to build alternatives to the status quo.

Obviously JUMP CUT is such an alternative institution. The radical movement needs its own institutions, not because we will gradually build a parallel culture that will simply take over when it's large enough, and not because we think alternatives are "purer" or able to break totally from the dominant ideology of our society. It's because only alternative institutions and projects can openly and continually fight back, provide a reference group for media activists, establish a basis for accountability within the movement, and provide the support for protracted resistance. Only publications and projects which are financially independent of state and corporate funding have a material basis for challenging the dominant order. And with Reagan's present and future declared intention of slashing federal arts and humanities budgets and giving top priority to elite well-established institutions, the prospects for grass roots projects and alternatives are getting dinner all the time. Will this drive some to a more conformist stance? Will it produce a new spirit of independence and opposition?

It remains to be seen what other publications will do, but the example of the British film journal, *Screen* is instructive. In over ten years of being run by and written by nominal Marxists, this state-funded publication has never produced an institutional analysis of the British Film Institute, although many of the magazine's writers work in and around the BFI. Reading the past decade of *Screen* one would never know there

has been an ongoing massive struggle for racial equality in Britain and a military occupation of Northern Ireland. While studiously avoiding such fundamental Marxist concepts as "class," and "class struggle," the publication's writers have scolded with great gusto feminists, political activists, and documentary filmmakers for theoretical impurity. Such selective vision over such a long period of time certainly indicates something which seems suspiciously self-serving.

Radical cultural workers cannot be "above" the movement or on the sidelines from it. They cannot hide behind their presumed expertise and in-group jargon. They must be part of the movement and take stands and actions within it. And the movement today demands that one grapple with issues of imperialism, class, racism, and sexism as integral parts of an oppressive system. That means men have to listen to and come to terms with feminism intellectually and personally. That means white North Americans and Europeans have to overcome their racism and ethnocentrism by learning about and from Third World people.

To be detached on principle or in practice is to play the flip side of the Old Left political assumption that art and culture are instrumental — a "service" to the movement. Cultural workers have to learn about politics, to become an inherent part of the movements they are working with. They cannot act as specialists whose political arena is the one ring circus of other culture specialists. Nor can they act as professionals who provide a service without questioning the goals and activities of those they serve.

Almost all cultural workers, almost all JUMP CUT readers, and certainly the three writers of this editorial, belong to the petty bourgeoisie, that class that exists between the ruling class of capitalists and the working class. The genius of this class is precisely to stay in the middle, to vacillate, to remain ambiguous and detached from the historical forces and actions surrounding it. Constantly trying to play both ends against the middle, the petty bourgeoisie is expert at trying to turn mass movements and capitalist imperatives to its own ends. In the present era it internalizes its schizophrenic social-political situation and copes by asserting extreme individualism, claiming irony as freedom and copping out from commitment.

All of which is not to dismiss petty bourgeois individuals from the stage of history. But it is to underline the idea that cultural workers in particular must get beyond the self-validating world of like-minded professionals, of working only within established state and corporate institutions, the art world, and the media ghetto. Increasingly the times demand decision — to not cross a picket line, to join a demonstration, to help a group working for change, to speak out against injustice and repression. We don't get to choose the historical moment in which we live, but we do determine our stance toward that moment. The time is

now. Seize the time.

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